

AKBAR BUGTI AND AFTER IMPLICATIONS FOR BALOCHISTAN & PAKISTAN

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Akbar Bugti's killing in a military operation during the last week of August 2006 has raised many issues, including questions about the future of Pakistan's federal structure and suggestions of the downfall of Gen Musharraf, internal political disorder and external intervention leading to an independent Balochistan. How far are these assertions credible? Will Akbar

Bugti become a rallying point for Baloch nationalism? Will his killing trigger an armed movement against the security forces? Is the opposition likely to unite and wage a political struggle against Musharraf? Finally, is there an external conspiracy in what is happening in Balochistan? Is there a role for India?

I

BALOCH NATIONALISM WILL AKBAR BUGTI BECOME THE RALLYING POINT?

Akbar Bugti was never in the forefront of Baloch nationalism, when compared to other Baloch leaders like Khair Bux Marri or Ataullah Mengal. He remained primarily a Bugti, fighting for his own tribe, and in particular his sub tribe. Bugti was not only respected and admired, but also hated and despised, even by his own sub clans. His death, however, seems to have changed the position of Akbar Bugti. Many believe that Musharraf has made him a hero.

Ataullah Mengal made an important observation: Bugti's death has drawn a line between Balochistan and Pakistan. Some commentators even compared it with the events of 1971 and hinted that Balochistan was becoming East Pakistan. The Daily Times mentioned in its editorial that "Baloch

nationalism, amongst many factors was expressed more by tribal resistance and tribal honour." Will Akbar Bugti's killing become the rallying point for the Balochis? Is the line between Pakistan and Balochistan really drawn? Will Balochistan become another East Pakistan? Will there be a Baloch tribal resistance to defend their honour?

Three factors would determine the answers for the above questions. First, how strong is the Baloch triumvirate – Bugti-Mengal-Marri--without Akbar Bugti. Khair Bux Marri, Ataullah Mengal and Akbar Bugti, the much respected and feared leaders of the three major Balochi tribes formed a triumvirate at the apex level, support by their respective tribes. Today, the Bugtis are themselves divided, thanks

to the oppressive and narrow policies pursued by Akbar Bugti. Since the killing of his son, Salal Bugti, in June 1992, Akbar Bugti carried out a vendetta against the sub clans of Kalpars and Masuris, uprooting them from Dera Bugti, not allowing them to return. Since January 2006, the military regime has initiated a drive to rehabilitate the Kalpars and Masuris, and facilitate their return to Dera Bugti, mainly to undermine Akbar Bugti's hold over the entire Bugti tribe. Those who are being resettled openly support Musharraf. The Bugti jirga, just preceding Akbar Bugti's death, was part of this initiative. There have also been reports that the Bugti family itself stands divided in finding a successor to Akbar Bugti and the division of his huge property. These stories may be planted, but cannot be ruled out.

Second, the movement is not cohesive, but is divided by tribal loyalties. The Bugtis till recently fought primarily for their own rights, and not for any pan-Baloch cause. More jobs and increased royalties for the Sui gas to the Bugtis were their main demands. As late as three years ago, the Bugtis were fighting the other tribes in Balochistan. Akbar Bugti could not reconcile himself to the Marris and Mengals after the 1973 rebellion. The Marris and Mengals for their part did not trust Akbar Bugti either.

Unfortunately, Baloch nationalism has not transcended tribal rights and sentiments. There is some involvement of the middle class, but it is not substantial. This may or may not

change. Much would depend on the "tribal resistance" based on concepts of honour and revenge.

Third, there is no adequate political or material support from external powers. This would play an important role in taking the Baloch separatist movement further. Any comparison with East Bangladesh should consider this important point. The Baloch grievances may be comparable to that of the East Pakistan, but without an active external support, Baloch nationalism leading to an independent Balochistan is unlikely.

What will Bugti's killing then bring about? It may lead to emergence of pan-Balochi nationalism, which would prove costly for Pakistan over the long run. The Balochis will not forgive Pakistan for killing Bugti. What he could not achieve in his life, he may have achieved by his death. All this may occur over the long run; but there is no clear indicator that such a development is taking place now, that might lead to the creation of an independent Balochistan.

On the other hand, if Islamabad decides to adopt a serious political approach, this could have a positive impact. If the military regime allows the two Parliamentary Committees on Balochistan to work and takes a back seat by stopping military operations, a political solution is possible. Such a course would not remove the sense of alienation and deprivation, but would still create a dent in the demand for an independent Balochistan.

II WILL THE BALOCH ARMED MOVEMENT INTENSIFY?

Sardar Atalluah Mengal angrily responded “back to the mountains” to a question posed where they would go after his party members resigned from the Balochistan Legislative Assembly. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is waging guerilla warfare in the mountains. Are the Baloch nationalists likely to join the BLA? Is Akbar Bugti’s death likely to intensify the armed movement against Islamabad? The following factors would determine the success of an armed movement, ultimately leading to an independent Balochistan.

First, the strength and composition of the BLA. It consists primarily of Marris, though other tribes are reported to have joined the BLA. Fortunately for the security forces in Pakistan, the armed movement in Balochistan is divided in terms of the Bugtis and the rest. Most of the attacks carried out in Dera Bugti, especially in and around Sui, were undertaken by Bugti tribesmen close to Akbar Bugti. Until the BLA transcends from being a Marri militia, it is unlikely to threaten the Pakistani security forces. On the other hand, there are reports indicating that the BLA is slowing down its activities in the recent months, after being proactive in 2004 and 2005. There have been numerous surrenders and no pitched battles in recent months, though there were many explosions and attacks on gas pipelines. In the second half of 2006, there have been a series of surrenders by the Bugti and Marri tribesmen.

Second, the State is going full throttle, with no regards for human rights. The State has used heavy weapons and aerial bombing to fight the BLA. There

have been numerous disappearances, with more than 800 Balochis being held by the security/intelligence agencies. It is unfortunate that the international community has failed to take notice of human rights violations in Balochistan, giving Pakistan’s security forces a free hand. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) made a valiant attempt, especially after the December 2005 campaign to highlight these atrocities.

Third, there is no external material support for the Baloch armed movement. An armed struggle against an established state requires funding, training, safe havens and an arms pipe line from a country bordering the region where the armed conflict is taking place to succeed. Lack of support for the BLA or any other Balochi armed movement would be their greatest drawback in fighting a sustained war against the Pakistani security forces.

The resistance has not become a full fledged armed movement so far. On the other hand, it has slowed down as evident from surrenders, and fewer pitched battles and attacks on security installations. Unless there is a strong external involvement, supported by international concerns voiced regarding the human rights situation in Balochistan, the armed movement is unlikely to achieve its ultimate end – an independent Balochistan. There may be a series of attacks and explosions all over Balochistan, but that is acceptable to Islamabad.

III

WILL BUGTI'S KILLING DESTABILIZE THE MUSHARRAF REGIME? WILL IT CREATE INSTABILITY AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL?

It was commented that Akbar Bugti's killing would mark the beginning of the end for Gen Musharraf and that the opposition parties would come together, leading to political instability at the national level. Are these events likely to happen?

Political developments both in Balochistan and at the national level in Pakistan do not reveal that Gen Musharraf's position has become unstable or that the internal political situation is heading towards anarchy. It may ultimately, but not yet. Akbar Bugti's killing is unlikely to be a catalyst to trigger such a political development for the following reasons.

First, the political parties are divided both inside and outside the Parliament. Within Parliament, the King's party has a numerical majority. Akbar Bugti's killing has not divided it. This is apparent from the failure of the no confidence motion tabled by the opposition parties against the Prime Minister on 29 August, four days after Bugti's killing. Parliament remains stable.

Outside Parliament, except for the PML-N and, to an extent, the MMA, no other party has made strong statements on the killing thus far. PPP was traditionally against Akbar Bugti from the days of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The MQM made noises, keeping in mind the Balochi votes in Karachi and the border districts of Sind, but is unlikely to take any further action. The MMA has been threatening to resign from the Balochistan Legislative

Assembly and launch a national campaign since Akbar Bugti's death, which is yet to materialize. Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain made an interesting calculation - if 20 PPP members resigned, he would also resign to show his solidarity for Balochistan and Bugti. After three weeks of Bugti's killing, only one person belonging to the BNP has resigned from the Parliament.

Second, there is a clear divide between Punjab and Balochistan, with little or no sympathy in Punjab over the death of Akbar Bugti. While the strikes called by the parties and groups in Balochistan and Karachi were successful, Punjab remained unaffected. Even rural Sind, apart from border districts where there is a sizeable Balochi population, remained unaffected by hartals and strikes. In the Sindh Legislative Assembly a resolution on Bugti's killing was not allowed, and the Speaker prorogued the Assembly session.

Clearly, comments on Akbar Bugti's killing leading to the weakening of the federation are exaggerated. The threat of the smaller provinces joining against Punjab and Islamabad has not fructified so far. It may in future, but Bugti's killing is not going to trigger that process. Gen Musharraf has clearly not been shaken by Akbar Bugti's killing or the subsequent opposition. He repeatedly emphasized that the writ of the State is supreme and he would fight the miscreants. In his own style Musharraf also made a jingoistic statement: If someone wants

to fight Pakistan, he has to fight me first.

IV IS THERE AN EXTERNAL CONSPIRACY?

Ralph Peters, a retired Marine Colonel wrote an article in the June 2006 issue of the US Armed Forces Journal redefining the Middle East. As a part of this exercise, he has envisioned a “Free Balochistan” comprising those areas presently in Pakistan and the Baloch dominated areas in Iran. The Chinese interest in Gwadar is well known. There have also been numerous reports in the Pakistani media about Indian and Iranian interests in Balochistan; many at the highest levels, including Gen Musharraf, have accused India for causing the trouble in Balochistan. Is there a new great game being played there? Are external interests in Balochistan helping the Baloch armed movement?

First, is there an American conspiracy in Balochistan for pursuing the interests mentioned in this article? The article was published in the US Armed Forces Journal, but need not reflect the views of the Armed Forces. Besides, both the article and the map which appeared were focused on redrawing the borders primarily of Iran and Iraq. It does not refer to a free Balochistan,

but Afghanistan spreading further to include the NWFP. If one has to take this ‘vision’ seriously as an American game plan for Pakistan, it would lead to erroneous conclusions. The US would prefer a stable Pakistan, where the nuclear assets are in safe hands. The US administration does not seem to have an alternative plan beyond Gen Musharraf; given their current relations, it appears the US primarily relies on Gen Musharraf.

Undoubtedly, the Chinese presence and interests in Gwadar is an issue of concern for the US. Would that concern go to the extent of establishing an independent Balochistan? The US would balance Chinese interests by political and military support to the rulers of Pakistan rather than create a new entity. There are theories that an independent Balochistan would serve American interests vis-à-vis Iran. With the US firmly entrenched in Afghanistan and Iraq, would they start another front, at the cost of antagonizing nuclear Pakistan? Unlikely.

V IS THERE AN INDIA HAND? SHOULD INDIA PLAY A PROACTIVE ROLE?

Given the open information available, there are no indications that India is involved in supporting the Baloch nationalist movement or the armed resistance. And given the Indian government’s strategic vision or the

lack of it in its region, one could safely conclude that India did not and does not play any role – positive or negative in Balochistan, Afghanistan, FATA and the Northern Areas.

What role should India play in Balochistan? A section in India suggests a tit-for-tat policy be pursued in Balochistan in response to Pakistan's interference in Jammu and Kashmir. There is also an argument that Pakistan has been blaming India for the troubles in Balochistan, so why not get involved? An answer to this question should not be based on emotional or jingoistic reasons. Rather, the policy should be based on India's long term strategic interests in Balochistan, and the entire region including Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

What are India's strategic interests in this extended area? Economic interests, in terms of reaching Central Asia and Iran should be of primary importance to India, as it needs access to both these regions to satisfy its energy requirements. Second, a relatively stable and moderate Pakistan, with nuclear weapons in safe hands, would be in India's long term strategic interests. Based on these objectives, India should decide what would be in India's interests – a stable Balochistan or an independent Balochistan?

Second, if India decides to support an armed movement in Balochistan, another important question should be addressed. Would such an effort be sustained over a period of time, ultimately leading to the establishment of an independent Balochistan? Unlike East Pakistan, India does not share any borders with Balochistan. Nor would it be able to effectively use the territories of either Iran or Afghanistan to provide the necessary support.

Even if India manages to create an independent Balochistan, what is the guarantee that it would support India?

How would Pakistan minus Balochistan react to India? Would it be cowed down and accept India's superiority in South Asia or become brazen and support jihadi groups in J&K and elsewhere in India leading to a communal bloodbath?

An open, full fledged Indian support to Balochistan is unlikely to secure India's interests. Alternatively, an option for India, though equally fraught with danger, would be to keep the trouble going, by funding the movement and providing political support, without leading to the creation of an independent Balochistan.